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Chapter I

The Land and Its Inhabitants

The appearance of the land. -- Location of the tribes. -- General characteristics of the natives. -- Maternal feelings. -- The fetisher. -- Religious beliefs. -- Cult of the dead. -- The Mfumu. -- Medicine.

[3] The area between the Congo, the Kasai, and the Kwango is covered with tall grass interspersed with stunted trees and a few small forests whose verdant canopy rises majestically over a boundless plain. A curtain of trees stretches along the rivers and gradually thins out as one penetrates into the interior. The path [3?] beaten by the regular passage of endless columns of natives, walking Indian file, winds sadly and monotonously across these lightly rolling plains. During the rainy season the grass, whose stems grow as high as two or two and a half meters, obstructs the view. During the dry season, destroyed by brush fires, it has given way to a blackish-yellow plain from which all life seems to have been [5?1] banished. From time to [6] time, at distances of 20 and sometimes 40 kilometers apart, we find groupings of huts, surrounded by a few manioc fields, [Fig. 1 appears here] banana groves, and sometimes small plots of maize and peanuts. Upon our arrival, [4?0?] the men look at us without concern, the mistrustful women hide [Fig. 2 appears here] in their huts or take refuge in the forest and fields, and the less timid children stare at us with the insouciance characteristic of their age. [7]

Beyond the Kasai, in the region of the Fimi, around Lake Leopold II, and along the Lukenie, the bush gives way to the forest, damp, swampy, dark, and mysterious.

[3?] At the confluence of the Fimi and the Kasai, a vast swampy [5?1] area stretches as far as the eye can see, bare of all arborescent vegetation, crossed by innumerable channels which are narrow and shallow during the dry season and wide to the point of covering practically the whole region during the rainy season.

[text continues on p. 3]

The Bongangɛ́ are divided as follows:

1) Bongangɛ́, in the narrow sense of the term (Bonɛ́lɔ́ Iɛnɛ́, B. Bolakɛ́, B. Bongɛ́ngɛ́, B. Bondɔ́wɛ́, B. Lokɔ́kɔmyɛ́)

2) Bongangɛ́ of Bakoyɛ́, or Bolima

3) Bongangɛ́ of Mbómbé or Bonɛ́lɔ́ Bonɔ́ɔ

Then Lɔndɔ́, Bakoyɛ́, and Mbómbé each have an Ɛ́fɔ group and a Bongangɛ́ group. The Bongangɛ́, in the narrow sense of the term, have in addition a "slave" group named Bɔnɔ́ɔ, a part of which is located with the Bonɔ́ɔ. A foreign clan is settled with the Ɛ́fɔ of Lɔndɔ́; they are the Bɔfɔlɛmbɔ́kɔ, descendant of a man named Ekonda (Imbɔ́lɔ) and his sister who was married to Mbete, a slave from Bompɛ́ngɛ́ (Wɛ́ngɛ́nɛ́) who was freed by his master.

Many villages have foreign groups living with them such as descendants of slaves (ekwɛ́lɛ́), or others (Ekonda, Bombwanja, groups related by marriage called lɔ́kɔ́lɔ, mpɛ́mɛ́ or bowɛ́lɔ́, and mbɛ́kɔ́lɔ́, (1) etc.). [249]

1. Mpɛ́mɛ́ or bowɛ́lɔ́ are any foreigners who were formerly invited by the group patriarch to remain with him in order to carry out certain tasks, especially metal-working. Mbɛ́kɔ́lɔ́ is the term applied to a child born to a woman out of wedlock (Chapter I, Part 2, Article IV, 3). Such children are also called ɔkɔ́ɔ y'ɔ́ɔmɛ, "the husband's flying dogs," because they are not his own children but are attached to their mother's husband in the fashion of these animals, who attach themselves to trees when they sleep.

If we add the descendants of relatives who have married into other more or less remote groupings, the prohibition against marriage on account of kinship applies to a good many people. In accordance with the law of exogamy, such a kin group may be widely dispersed geographically, and it is understandable that it is not always easy to

The risk of being wounded, reduced to slavery, or killed, often cools the adulterer's passion. Therefore, the more the husband showed that he was fearless, violent, physically powerful, or of a high social position, the more his wives and their lovers were on their guard. Certain men were so jealous of one of their wives and so determined to take vengeance with extreme severity that the tempters did not even dare to think of approaching her.

2) The payment of an indemnity seems to be the standard sanction. It is the only one that remains legal at the present time; consequently it is coming more and more to the fore.

Any of the types of evidence examined above justify the claim for an indemnity.

The indemnity may be minimal, consisting of 2 to 5 copper rings, or heavy, going up to 20 to 30 rings or a slave. The maximum is always demanded for adultery with a favorite. The size of the payment depends on the persons involved, the relationships that bind them, the frequency of misconduct, and the nature of the action observed. For instance, if the husband catches the couple when arranging a meeting or exchanging gifts, the indemnity will be small; if, on the other hand, he has caught them in flagrante delicto, it will be high.

A man who demands a high indemnity must expect to be treated the same way should the occasion arise. The application of the law of retaliation in that case is fully approved by Nkundó opinion.

In addition to the situations examined in the preceding article, there exists another which does not result in an indemnity claim. It arises if the culprit belongs to a clan of slaves or is in some other way subject or inferior (mpámá or bowélé). (1) Even

1. Strangers who are settled with a tribe or group but are in no way related to them.

if the husband catches the culprit in the act, he politely asks him to go away and leave his house [321] and his wife: dondéli lómbe. njóyá é! Here is true Nkundó courtesy in practice. It might

On the day set aside for establishing the position of the boldmbé, there is a great feast. All the clans and neighboring villages that have been invited gather at the home of the polygamist in question. He presents the woman to them and addresses the gathering. "Here is the woman whom I want to make my boldmbé, as I have already announced to you. Today I am making public the decision I already made a long time ago. Be it known to all that no man may touch her, or he will be severely punished." Then two women (in rare instances, two men) hold the woman, and the husband unfastens her belt and rips off all her clothing. Then the assistants tie a rope or a belt of mpangé (striped antelope) skin around her, and to it they attach various furs. From that day until her death she may no longer wear the clothing (bisôbo) of other women; she must always [350] be dressed in furs. Hence her name, boldmbé wa bikôfi, "boldmbé with furs." Then her husband gives her pots of palm oil with which she will have to cover herself. Two men approach her; they are chosen among the handsomest in the village (1) (married or single) and are

1. They are then (sic) relatives of the husband. Nkundó law dictates that no stranger shall perform a function of the slightest importance -- not even that of silencing a gathering. According to their saying, bofaya ifîkîlî lokôngo, "a stranger does not cut up a guinea hen."

richly adorned with furs, belts of mpangé, beads, raffia fabrics with jagged edges, copper rings on their ankles, etc. Stepping in rhythm, they lead her to the house intended for her which is surrounded by a fence of bofeko posts (Ricinodendron africanum) held together with palms. This hut with its fence is called lîkôn.

There the boldmbé will reside for months and years (up to three or more, they say). She is secluded there, so to speak, and may not go out. If she needs to go to the banana groves for her personal needs, she covers and surrounds herself with a mat so that no one will see her.

In fact, women who do not wish to become Catholic take the paths described in 2) and 3).

5) There are even women who prevent their husbands from becoming polygamous. If he loves them a great deal, he will yield in the end, even if personally he would very much like to build a harem for himself. This was done by Mputš (recently deceased, February 3, 1933), wife of Bolfinda, chief of Ekikola. Bolfinda was rich and tried more than once to acquire other wives. He even took them home and paid the bride prices -- for example, for Ilea of Bongili. But Mputš made life unbearable for them and thus forced them to leave. She absolutely wanted to keep her husband, [366] to whom she had given two boys and three girls, for herself alone.

We can therefore conclude that among a minority of Nkundó women there exists a real preference for monogamy, even if we leave out of consideration all those who may be impelled by religious reasons. But most of them are in no way opposed to polygamy.

2. A preference for polygamy

Most Nkundó women like polygamy and prefer it to monogamy. They make fun of a impómbonjembe and are proud of the large number of wives in their husbands' harems.

Their indifference or aversion to monogamy can be explained on the basis of habit or atavism. But what is the basis for their marked preference for polygamy despite all its disadvantages? I asked this question of a number of polygamists' wives. Naturally, they first invoked the custom, (1) except

[367]

1. This is the standard explanation a native hands out to a foreigner or to someone he does not know or by whom he thinks he is unknown.

for those who had known me for a long time. But the serious reason they gave was the greater comfort of life in a harem.

6) The parent's opposition to reprimands by strangers is even greater as a general rule. They try to cover up and justify the faults of their progeny, whom they will fiercely defend. The children naturally know all this and take advantage of it.

7) The polygamous household, with all its rivalries among co-wives, cannot but accentuate all such [516] adverse effects on the children's education. The conflicts, spiteful comments, palavers, etc., are easily extended to the children. And each wife defends her own.

8) Everything is public; there are no secrets; everything is known, seen, and heard. People do not restrain themselves and the presence of children does not stop the flow of insults and obscenities which anger provokes. The young people see many things it would be better for them not to know. They are present at domestic quarrels and are witnesses to dissensions. All this is increased by life outdoors, in the street, and by the thinness of partitions.

9) Another factor is added nowadays: the facility of communications and the presence of European stations. Boys can always run away and find shelter with the Whites or their native employees. The girls seek out kinswomen who live at such stations, even though they must help a little with the housework, in the hope of later enjoying a greater freedom and living in luxury. Parental influence and authority are naturally weakened as a result.

10) Finally, Nkundó education lacks any solid basis, any religion or religious morality. Everything is based on natural, physical fear: the fear of punishments (physical or based on superstition), harmful consequences of bad actions (palavers, difficulties, fines, indemnities, sometimes the shame of being caught -- as in theft). It is especially this lack of religious motivation that makes their moral education bear so little fruit. As the Nkundó are accustomed to this imperfect state, they do not feel the need for such a foundation. That is why it is so difficult to instill any moral conscience into them. The patient and perservering action of the great Christian truths with their institutions for moral formation (uninterrupted preaching, confession, prayer) are needed to endow

The exogamy rules of the Ekonda do not only refer to their own, agnatic group, but also to all cognate groups to whom kinship relations can still be traced back, i.e., a span of about five generations.

Groups of Rank E

It may be assumed that these groups always extend beyond the confines of a village. Those parts of a group who have settled next to each other have their communal meeting place, but even the dispersed fractions of the group may come there to consult. In former times probably only one such group had a nkfumf, a sacred prince who lived in the main village (e.g., Isangi), while the other villages were ruled by the senior. Once the title of nkfumf was also bestowed on persons from other villages, the importance of the E-groups almost completely disappeared. Also, in this category the local group plays a much greater role. Occasionally it even includes dependent villages which have not yet been "paternalized," i.e., which are still regarded as alien. In this connection it should be mentioned that probably all larger local groups tend to reconstitute themselves into kinship groups by reinterpreting the genealogy to suit their purposes. It is certain that the "kinship relation" of many "kinship groups" has been created in this manner. We may dismiss the possibility that groups which are divided from one another by the rule of exogamy will invent a kinship relation so close that a previously possible marriage would be outlawed. Also, the combination of other important functions of the lower ranks resulting from the invention of a closer relationship would run counter to the tendency of progressive differentiation (17).

17. We know through statements of the natives that about one hundred years ago the exogamy limit was lowered to the present level. Before that time only the Lonkîna was permitted among the Ngele, Nkoco, and Bolfma.